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## House God

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Bard

# House God

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Written Arts  
of Bard College

by  
Geneva Zane

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York

May 2018



*For my mother:*  
*God of our House*



*Last God*

I.

In the mountains, a shot: and that is the last of them. There are no Gods left to pray to, call out to in the darkness of our own making. There are no flowers in winter. My friend's children will not know the stomach devotion of the divine—their dreams will not quake together, apart, together again. The children of the Godless world will sleep in beds of soft white down. They will hold each other on the banks of the river, heads blessedly empty of the King who once lived there. They will make up prayers of their own, in languages only they understand. They will revere while no one is watching.

I am in the Olympia Public library, and the pages are turning to dust in my hands, and I can hear the people forming a perimeter, ordering me to open my fists and reveal what I am hiding. My mother calls me and says she heard the news, in the middle night, from a voice she did not know. My sister calls and says she has been drinking and she wants to come home.

I remember standing on a chair to drop a coin into the warren of our House God, before my mother lifted me into her arms and carried me to bed. I remember Laura sitting beneath a dim light, a wavering halo and all around us Gods, looking into the center of myself saying, "There is nobody here who doesn't know how I feel about you." I remember how it felt to pray, before I learned to speak—like being raised from the sea with human hands, one sweet breath in the sun.

In a clearing of the mountains a God stands alone, Her hooves part of the Earth. The orchids have bloomed at last, and it is as if the air is singing, rejoicing in the return of a life

that is a thousand years old. The grass has grown so high that it brushes the stomach of the world's last God, but it does not bother Her. She stares ahead, unchanging, unshifting, never lifting Her cannon bones from the mounds of earth they are buried beneath. She does not see the hunters, or if She does She does show it in Her face, Her soft cow-eyes.

She does not flinch into the barrel of the gun. She has no thoughts to give, no last words. She has always been alive, and then She is not.





*Plum God*

I.

Here we are, children in the sense that our parents are standing on the shoreline watching us with their lips between their teeth—it is here that we learn to skip stones. All at once I am able to skim slim bodies of shell, stones, sea glass, across the black water, to shape my body into forms unknown. The release of a stone is the first human indulgence I ever enjoyed, that is to say, understood. All other motions of my hand and tongue had been blind marks on the surface of an unseen edifice, a great tower of Cyclopean stones and carved pig iron, assured to be real by everything I was told. But not my stones.

Keen and whip-colored, they fly.

It is here that both my sister and I relive our clearest memory of river summer, the sun like a white cloth on our tongues, a figure struggling onto the shore, shaking her prehensile fins, a cavernous hole where Her chest should be, dark blood where the hole should be. Lilac colored skin, like the tongue of a flower, soft mewling whimpers, and then, a sudden embarrassment, believing myself to be seeing something naked, unsure if I should cover my eyes or unbutton my shirt.

But Avis remembers no such revulsion— only a dim recollection of sub-human shape, limbs obvious, legs and arms even-numbered. Our dog might have tried to chase Her, for he was a killer and a God catcher, straining against the hold on his leash, our bare heels scraped the rock shore, crying out against the fibrous burn of rope in our palms, while the creature in

the shallows lifted Her wide, flat face! Then the cove was empty, and the waves lapped against the shore and our Killer growled at a nothing.

We feared to swim— we had read in our mother's diary of huge horned Gods that lived in the central trench, and of chemical spills that would vitiate our bodies, tear them apart from the outside in, leave us quaking and frothing in bitter shallows.

## II.

It is clear from the start, a start that begins with a false step and shoes on the wrong feet. No, we are not like other children: we are a pair, and we love to read. Our friends exist in active singulars, and it is impossible for Avis and me to fit among them, for us to slow our thoughts as others' play demands. Our vocabulary is tailored for each other, words drained of their meaning and refashioned to reflect our needs, and nobody else understands, and nobody else is allowed. Always the play ends with Avis's teeth full of blood and skin, or her knuckles a scentless purple, or with a milk bottle knocked over, broken on the floor and smelling of rot. Our mother picks us up in her borrowed car, and she sees our torn faces and weeps for her animal children.

We prefer to play with each other—to bury our toys in the earth and wait for something to grow. Should a bird or a boy walk past us, our pockets are full of stones.

We tell each other stories. Our tongues are little and slow. Avis's stories are about the locations of treasure and the recognition of others, who look up to her stone palisade and open their mouths in worship. She is a conqueror, an emperor, a movie star. She is the giant cougar baby left behind by her true parents, and now the future they feared most had come to be. In my stories I am alone, the cataloger of made up creatures, the companions which assure me that I am good and that I am never truly alone. In the chill hollow of our shared doctor appointments, our mother would tell us about being a child, about lighting fires and hating Gods. She would tell us how blue the air was.

We are not identical, though often we are mistaken for one another, and our faces are the same. I am shy and go to soccer practice. Avis is senseless and grows something wrathful in the pocket of her corduroys.

### III.

When Avis is born she is firm and clean as an avocado pit. Say a prayer, little killer: here is the doctor now, and here is the pail of milk-skinned water which will grow a full set of teeth and two black eyes. She can spell her name on construction paper; she can stand on her own feet. She can grasp the curtains of our living room, tear open their cloud bodies, and if she were not holding my shirtsleeve Avis would spool them into her new hands; would pull the curtain rod to the floor and weep.

The night has slid, crippled, into our living room and torn the curtains open, and the moon is orange and sick, and our father is outside trying to catch a firefly. I tighten my fist around my sister's, catch my fingers in the collar of her t-shirt. We are curious, were raised curious. Maybe we are younger than I remember, and soon we will be sent upstairs with milk in our hands, and Avis will awake in the contra-night, harsh and furious, still cold from a dream.

"You shouldn't stay up this late," our mother says. She is reading a book, or writing a poem, or holding a knife in her teeth. She is a blue-lit widow, and my father is lost in the night while she sits at the desk he built himself and studies the daughters she grew in the dirt. She is an American obelisk carver—she is our mother, and she smells like milk, and we love her.

"How were we born?" we ask. We are only a year apart. Our grandmother calls us Irish twins and lets us command the television. When Avis was born she was loud and cruel as the stinging nettle. When I was born all the lights went out and roared in the furnace of New York—it was a hundred and thirty degrees.

“You were a cloud of dust,” our mother says, turning a page, or capping her pen, or drawing blood. “And then a terrible wind came and blew you into being. And when you have children, they will breathe to life right in front of you, and when you die you will turn back into dust.”

“When will we die?” I ask, or Avis asks, or maybe nobody says anything, and the front door slams open, our father standing in the threshold, a wet light in his hand.



#### IV.

I remember waking, abrupt, purposeful, and being unsurprised to find my sister awake as well, to hear her wailing softly to herself. We were creatures of dreams. More than once we awoke to find we had not only shared the same night terror, but had brought the object into being, a smoking husk of a thing which heaved its existence onto our carpet. Sometimes we told our mother, who disposed of our nightmares with the same face she used to remove our splinters and expose our secrets. Sometimes we would cup them in our hands and spin them down the drain, Avis standing on my feet so she could see.

There were prayers to stop the hazed creatures which would crawl through our windows, rest their cheeks on our pillows, slip hands up our shirts and trace letters on our stomach, but we did not know how to say them, and we did not know what they meant. There were vitamins we were supposed to take, but we chewed them up and spat them under our bed. In dreams my sister and I were a covenant of blurred oneria, one building upon the other's intentions, understanding implicitly where to enact the apse, the interior colonnades. The language we spoke was intricate and barbarous, like a siege engine erected before the great gates of a hollow city. The creatures we brought back writhed on the matted floor and cursed our names with severed tongues.

Who is up with her now? Who is tearing the fabric of her nightmares apart like rips in stockings, sitting at the foot of her bed and describing things from their imagination? I pull

myself from sleep and imagine I have found the answer to a question, but without anyone beside me it cannot be brought into being. On the other side of the lean ocean my sister is awake and beginning her day, pressing a thought into her bound notebook, forgetting a dream she had the night before, a dream of food and splendor and strange animals...

V.

The bait traps were an invention of our own, pulleys and cages tuned to every shiver of pressure or sound, mother of pearl and bent green twigs. Their mechanism could not be explained, only felt. Avis and I would say nothing, but the wires remained humming and aligned. We had caught things before—squirrels, birds, a blind raccoon which hung from the cords like a gambrel hook, human hands clasped in prayer.

Now we, sweet woods slayers, had caught a God.

“What,” said Avis, sticking her fingers between the slats of the cage, “should we do with it?” She had a habit of baring her teeth after questions, of biting people and stealing things. The Plum God looked into her animal eyes and asked a question we did not hear.

My mother had never taught us to pray, but she taught us to be afraid. “We should let it go,” I said, looking at The Plum God’s tiny clawed paws, Her two twitching tails. We were told in school about children who angered the wild Gods and were stolen, fed upon for a thousand years in the secret hollows. But those were just stories to keep us from eating the offerings in front of graves, the white rice and tangerines, the coins in jars of clear water. Avis drank the incense at our uncle’s grave, because I told her not to.

“I think we should sell it,” said Avis. “We should charge everyone a dollar to look at our God.” It had been Avis’s idea to bait the trap with mushrooms. We had picked them on our way home from school, wrapping their sinewy bodies in one of our brother’s t-shirts. But it had been my idea to hang the cage.

The Plum God began to whine then, like an animal, a dog who is spoken to seriously and intelligently and tries to mimic the mechanical actions of speech, the open and shut tongue-touching actions of speech. It was the noise Avis would make, in crowds, in dreams. Sometimes Avis only spoke in growls, and I would be her translator.

“We should let it go,” I said, lowering the cage to the ground.

“We should eat it,” said Avis, and The Plum God began to shriek with Her round white mouths as my wild fingers unclasped the catch of prison...



*Pink God*

I.

She has been living on the truck for forty days, sleeping in the front seat, brushing her teeth with her fingers, begging her father to pull over so she can relieve herself in the sand. She has been curling her legs beneath the dashboard, where they rest uncomfortably against the glove compartment, her pant legs sticking to her skin with sweat and grit— they have not been washed in forty days. They smell of urine. Everything does, even the air, even her father in the driver's seat, singing along to a song nobody will ever hear again. She has been writing a letter in her head. She has been holding her rat cage in her lap and counting backwards from a thousand—when she reaches zero she will begin again.

Somewhere between Yuma and San Andre she decided she would have to be renamed, a name as harsh and immense as the quarter-hour purple of the desert. The name would be powerful and surreal. The name would suit the body she was cultivating under a deceptive layer of skin. The name was growing in the pocket of her sport coat, an item she and her father had found lost at a truck stop. It had glistened with the knowledge of a new name, though it hung off her shoulders and was tight across her chest. It seemed that if she kept it close to her body, hiding her face in the lapels, the coat would reveal her new name in a listless whisper, like a voice in a dream. The rat would have to be renamed too, and she decided, somewhere between San Andre and Yuma, to name it Alexander, which is, of course, my father's name, but how was she to know?

“Look out your window,” her father says, pointing a red, bodiless finger towards the sun. “That’s the Devil’s peak.” The truck stumbles in its loping gait, and her father’s teeth collide with each other, a noise she hates above all others. “Your mother and I used to come here when we were kids, and get up to no good. You know how it is,” he laughs, but his daughter does not know, has never held a woman without piteous devotion, has never not been good. The desert is a white hot hundred thousand and uninteresting. The truck has driven in circles for forty days.



## II.

My father drives in the desert now, he and George united in the thud and slur of the last good day. Their car, sweet Toyota, does not jolt over the road, does not nod with the pulse of George's heart rate monitor. The sky is clear of shadows. They do not turn to each other to ask "What's worse, a vulture or a Death God?" "What's worse, a murder or a cancer?"—instead, my father rubs at the stubble on his chin, flicks the headlights, while his brother beats his head against the window, sweat dripping under the collar of his sweater.

They have made this trip before: they have had shaved heads and dirty faces, marks on the fat of their palms. My father found Zen, lost Zen, found a new Zen, and came to the desert to lose Zen once more, its smooth pearl surface buried in red sand. This was when Gods were wild. They had bought a gun back in Yuma—they had eaten Gods before.

As one fine body they acted, their killings predicated on faith and ritual and crazed blood study. The first shot George would fire was a warning, leaning out the passenger window with his mouth open and his fist open, flat across the roof in a gesture of ravenous piety. Spat out, rough with desire, the first shot needs only to be loud, so all that hear it know the strong are mounting their chargers, are circling the mount. Its echoes must chew through the steppes and valleys of the sun, slither into the secret crevices of God caves, bird's nests: then the air is alive. My father had read the old texts on God hunts, spine curved uncomfortably beneath the Olympia

public library: the paint, the staves, the years spent waiting for cosmic elision, shaving the shape of their boats with blessed swords and oriented tools.

But now: now any child is a Zathseeri, any Cadillac the white-blond steed of consecration. My father howls at the helm of his ship in a language only he and his brother understand, and imagines there is blood in his mouth, paint on his tongue.

The second shot is one of purpose, like food chewed and spat into a toothless mouth—he'd never miss. It takes two to kill a God, two bullets, two brothers, two eyes on the road. With the smoke rising from the engine, spinning in their wake, it was not clear which marks were birds and which were the sand-skinned heriots of worship, the many winged beasts of dream or nightmare. The second shot would bite through Georg's arm with a viperous howl, and he'd laugh with his whole mouth, a warrior, a divine creature who would never vomit into his wife's hands or piss into a bag taped to his inner thigh. Each God felled is another day that they will live, and surely they are immortal now, if the feathers and bones that stain the sand are not a hallucination they are sharing, a dream they have had together.

No longer. We will live our whole lives shooting into the air, shouting into the wind, feeling the Zen sear off our skin onto the rocks like common blood, holy ichor... but always the shadows gain, and the guns in our hands click-click emptiness, and we will pray that they really were birds, that there is gas in the tank, that the beasts on the edges of our vision are farther than they seem...

### III.

At this hour there is no one alive but the clam digger, and the clam digger's tools. The surf pounds with the liquid metal sound of a kiln, like a hammer falling on a clamped mold, a crude figure or totem forming in the conscious heat. Against the black beach the waves fall in a cavalry, as if a team of chariots has been felled all at once, their muscle bodies white and heavy. The small heads of seals are dangerously visible, this early in the morning.

He has been on the beach since the pre-dawn, when his dogs whined to be let out into the fog and the frost was still new. His tools are caked in sand and mud. His thick boots, many times repaired, sink into the sand with each step, and each footprint fills with seawater, and that small ocean teems with unseen creatures who worship unknown, interior lives. The wicker basket strapped to his back like a portable sarcophagus is only half-full of clams, but it is still pleasantly heavy, enough. Tonight he will sit on his porch with no shoes on and run his hooked knife through the clam jaw, sucking on a wedge of lemon, while the dogs play with each other.

The clam digger has begun to dig, an identical trench to the thousands he had dug before. Sometimes there is a clam inside, winking like a lost tooth, and sometimes there is nothing at all. Sometimes his dogs help him dig, but today they are chasing the birds, the fat sea birds that cry out even in the dead of night, lost from one another in dreams they dream alone. The clam digger has just begun to dig his thousandth hole, bent over the surf with his shovel and his collar in his teeth, when an immense wave throws itself before him, tangled up in the sand like a fisherman's net. The clam digger stumbles over his basket, and thinks, in that instant between

standing and falling, that he sees something in the lip of the wave, a creature that is masked and skin smooth, beautiful the way a book is beautiful: bound and embossed and right for hands.

*Surely, he thinks, or he does not think. Surely that is the answer.*

Many nights my father's knife has slipped, jerking out of the clam heart and into his patient flesh. He sutures himself together with fishing wire and hot glue: always his palms are aching, thorned with scars.

#### IV.

The same day The Pink God falls from His honey sky, the baby she has held in her roped figure cries for the first time. The doctors are weeping, the nurses are weeping, the anesthesia is a new body weeping, seeping into the delivery room. "It's a happy day," she says to herself, and she is surprised that it is. "It's a happy day. I'm sorry." Her son wails because he is small and unknowing, because his lungs hurt in their newness, because he is surrounded by strangers. The world wails because their Lord is no more.

When her son is ten he is given a BB gun, but he never fires it. He fingers the trigger and runs his hands along the barrel and eyes the squirrels with a crimson meaning, but the silence stays, even when a deer wanders with its clean mouth to the slats of the porch, soft as a warm towel. How easy it would be, and she watches from the window and waits for the shot to sound. A catholic pride begins to form in the cavity of her ribs, thinking of her son the killer, the admonishment she will level when she finds the deer bones and patched fur beneath the floorboards. But the shot never comes.

When her son is ten he is given a water color set in a blue tin, the colors whole as cakes of soap. She would never have been able to touch those paints. She would have stood before the canvas and trembled at its blankness. She would have held the brush over the tin and feared the act she was about to commit, transforming a perfect object into a directionless image, but her son is not afraid. He crouches on the porch and holds the sketch pad in his strange hands,

the ring and middle fingers missing their top digits, their fingernails. The mattress bulges with the lump of his pictures, and she wants to look inside them, and she does. He paints nothing. He paints Gods.

The day he was born she was sure the world was over, and that her son would grow up without the edifices of her understanding. He would never know what it meant to live in uneasy fear, nervous worship, one more rat in the house of God. But what is a God but an animal, and what do animals do but die with bullets in their jaws, tangled in the wheels of a semi-truck? Her son is still alive. He drifts to stillness in a perpetual sailboat, adjusting the shroud, painting the dawn.



*Gold God*



## I.

In our language, which is still new and vowel-less, She is called Gäldädd, the sun with a thousand wings. In the language of Gods She has no name, only the knowing deference of lesser creatures, for of this river valley the Gold God is queen, and smoke rises indolent from our crude forest churches for Her infinite tongue to taste. With Her begins the cycle, as it was written: the mornings are Her quaking birth, the moon Her feeble shroud. We are new figures of the river mud, clasping smooth stones, and in the hour it takes to unspool one thought from our mouths The Gold God has been born a thousand times.

With the dawn comes our first offering, for, as queen, Gäldädd demands, and, as subjects, we provide. While the sun struggles from its shell and She awakens in Her dry mountain cave, we burn the lambs born beneath cursed stars, as is known to please Her. The stench lifts to the mountains, shaking that secret form from the hold of sleep, unfolding Her folded wings. They are not like a bird's, and they are not like the insects which will plague our fields should the rituals fail—they are like streamers of foam, cream-white and tangling behind Her in the wind. Folded, no one knows Her form, if She even has one beneath Her uncountable scarves. Her cave is a secret even to the God-Killers, who wander the mountains without fear, their cudgels strapped to their back with thin bands of leather.

She is alight until midday arrives, snapping smoke into Her jaws and turning in lazy hermeneutical spirals. While our Lord drags Her nacreous claws over fallow farmland and

village centers, we hasten to prepare the second offering, every man able-bodied carrying a coffer to the dais of demand. Jealously do we guard our treasures, for there is nothing She prizes more than gold, and it is the villages who have failed to sate Her desires that become the shivering prey of Her full mouth.

## II.

There is little they have, and even less they can give, but still they strap the offerings to their backs and kiss their mother goodbye. For days she has been weaving their new sandals, bent over the loom with crooked fingers and worn features, and they recognize themselves in the lines of her face, and they see their father too. They will make this journey without him, and for the first time in many weeks Yonten does not weep. The pallor of his cheeks is still red and soft, and his brothers still hold him down in the fields until his nose begins to bleed.

He and Dawa are the only ones left who can complete the pilgrimage: his sister is weak with a gentle plague, his second brother is fighting the Xiongu, in the guise of someone else.

The day of their departure begins bright and air heavy, and Yonten wants to joke about the blisters that will form against the new straw of his sandal straps, but his older brother stares straight ahead—they do not speak. Many others are on the road with them, some that Yonten recognizes from their village, as well as others who bear the pulpy scars of *other*: colored cloaks and sashes and strange headdresses. Some murmur prayers among themselves, and shout up and down the road in dialects he cannot understand. Most are silent.

Sometimes a royal palanquin gallops down the dirt road, and Yonten must hasten to press his forehead into the dirt, until the lord has passed. The scent of perfume lingers for miles after, elegant and clean. It makes the youngest brother's skin feel like it is burning. It is proof they are going in the right direction.

Always, strange animals appear on the edge of the road, watching the pilgrims with narrow eyes. Yonten pulls on his brother's sleeve, trying to point them out, but Dawa does not move his head, does not unclench his hands from the straps of the offering across his back.

### III.

It is many weeks before they arrive at the citadel. Yonten has slept in the rain, has eaten roots he found in the earth. His clothes stick to his body, and the bones of his neck are tight from sleeping on the ground, but he and his brother do not have enough money to stop at the rest stops which mark the road. They have tied their sandals to their belts, and their feet are black and calloused, like hardened fragments of coal.

The citadel looks like a drawing their sister would make as a little girl, a tower made of ice trapped inside a star. Yonten tips back his head with his mouth open and find the prayers rising from his throat like bubbles of air in boiling water. The guard at the door, his gold armor inscribed with the signs divine, laughs at them and their long teeth, making a movement with his hands which they recognize with shame. Their feet ache with each small step. The offerings feel like lead around their necks.

But here they are, in the temple of Ser Lha, the white-plum chapel of pursed lips and smooth edges, where God Himself rests in a gossamer chrysalis suspended by nothing! His hands, like the flowers of an immense yew tree, extend outwards, beckoning for what they have brought Him, what they bring Him every year. The other pilgrims shuffle to finely constructed daises that ring the great cavern, throwing their bundles of peaches and rice into the ravine, and The Gold God rumbles joyously, feasting with an awful complexity. Everywhere there are

armored guards, jabbing at pilgrims who do not move quickly enough, making the signs of prayer which He is known to adore. Everywhere there is the scent of perfume, acrid and beautiful.

Dawa throws his bundle first, and it tumbles for a moment before it is snatched into the hands of their savior, all hail the inimitable Gold God, He who waits at the end of the journey! Who could not weep, who could not fling all that they have in this world into the waiting maw? Who could bear to strap one's sandals on, hurry home?

#### IV.

The sun has pressed its fingertips to the mountain edges by the time of the third offering commences. On the banks of the river we are our reveries, bodies lit by the fine bodied fire, and Gældädd stretches over the water's surface to catch hundreds of fish in brackish waves. While we enact our individual, private cycles, we begin to shout our prayers, our adulations, weeping as She demands. Oh, grace! Oh, heavenly weight of God! For a moment in the hot of body and sand we are not beasts who howl in a howling trap, imprisoned by what we cannot know, what we were not born to know—now, as the sun breaks open over the mountains, we are the children of beauty, the subjects of the One True God, held and warm and safe at last...

With a roar like a crane snapping in half, something rises huge and masked from the river, catching Her in the freezing grip of His human hands and tearing Her down below. Far back, in the whorls of the forest, the colorless Gods begin to sound their call, the noises they make when cattle have been murdered and they can smell the blood in the air, and they love the smell of blood. The river becomes a pitch, a storm, and the foam caps are pink with pain. From beneath the water we can hear our Lord crying out, a thin, quivering sound like a hammer hitting stone, and we try to echo it, to adore in the way she has taught us. The waves reach the shore in a frenzied pulse, crashing over our reveled bodies, the cold seizing our muscles and the fire going out. No prayers are said, and no cessation of the screams, the battle wrathful, the fever siege.

And then a stillness, a relief, where we all pause half-in and half-out of each other, and then Her body rises to the surface, where the tide will come to break Her fully on the rocks.

The creatures of the tide pools will tend Her now, the unspined creatures, the delicate greens and blues now subjects of a soft dead God. Already we are composing the songs of our new King, our new Gold God, plotting the future of ritual, the practicalities of rebuilding a church, the anticipation of desire. Already She is fading from our minds: as is the cycle of Gods, as it is known, has been written.



V.

My sister falls asleep before I do, listening to my mother read, and I can hear her dreams from my pillow, urging me to close my eyes and join her in that strange antechamber of sleep and being. But I do not, even as the covers become heavy and thick and my sister tugs on the corners of my consciousness: I have to ask my mother a question.

“But where did The Gold God come from? How was He made?”

“Shh,” says my mother. “It means something other than what you think it does.”

“What do I think it means?” I say, but I am asleep now, and she does not answer.

The Gods in the books my mother reads are the ravenous kind, the ones with animal eyes and hot mouths full of teeth. They are different from the Greek stories, Hercules and Persephone and the Teumessian fox, which my sister and I listen to on a tape cassette, our heads close together between a pair of headphones. My mother reads to us of people, and it is the Gods who appear at last moment, shattering a human life: the great white beast who strikes Madeline down into the snow, the hideous sea serpent which at last captures Nastia and dashes her against the rocks. In some ways, I think, these stories are the beginning of a divine apathy that permeates every second of today, fostered by television and picture books. It is the person we revere, and the God we fear and despise.

Some nights my father reads us stories of the Valdic Heroes, any within a tribe who killed a God in open combat, and the description of their sea battles fill our mouths with the taste of blood, our dreams with the hot scent of sea air.



*House God*

## I.

She discovers, one day that she can climb onto the kitchen counter and get cups for herself: the beginning of a new and burning self. No longer a creature of others, just a creature of self. Her limbs are Herculean testaments of being, small in their t-shirt, one of her brother's, with a shark on the front. She too is a shark, and she too hungers for blood and water and the strength to grow larger.

Only when she turns eighteen, and her siblings are spun to their separate kingdoms in worlds of ice, does her family cease to eat on plastic dishes, unbreakable and colorful. But for now, still a child, the cabinet is like a casket of jewels. The light hits their hydrogen blues and disco pinks and the kitchen begins to glow, from the inside, a torch bug, a forest fire. She is standing on her toes, legs shaking, reaching blind and blindly reaching.

If she was older she would have known to be more careful, standing on one foot over the lip of the sink. She can almost discern the creature who lives in the warrens of their pipes and is never seen. They call him King Turtle (though of course He has no name) and feed Him table scraps. His temple is the cavern of their sink, beneath the drain, and He gurgles pleasantly when He is sated, and roars when He is hungry.

The day she discovers she can climb on to the counter begins a frantic devotion and devout freneticism. She shines her flashlight into the drain. She feeds Him peaches and sweets. The light bends out from the darkness and she can see nothing, no clarity to the name that has

always been without image, though the portrait in the foyer asserts that King Turtle is soft beaked, a coarse mast head stretching from His jewel shell, eight-sided, each coupled with a gray-gold flipper. Her father has painted words over this portrait, but she cannot read them, and when she learns to read she cannot understand what they mean.

“Stick your finger in,” her sister says, standing on her toes to see into the sink. Something within the house begins to roar, an animal trapped in a snare it cannot see, scratching at the flesh of her back, starved for air.

## II.

Sergei had three kids with his first wife, and so he had not questioned Eliza's disinterest, had accepted it with good grace and his signature, veteran, relief. The only thing Eliza remembers about being a child is sitting on the porch with her sister and eating small, oriental bananas. Their home in Greece had been the roost of a little *theós*— she and her sister had to be careful when fetching preserves from the cellar, never to touch the bottles which were offerings. Their father had a portrait done to hang in the entranceway, replacing the one that came with the house, which still clung to the old styles of *theós tou spitioú* portraiture, dark colors and thin gesso, impossible to discern even by candlelight. She cannot remember the house's name—only that it had been hard and cold, not at all like the Greek letters she still dreams in.

Her sister writes her a letter which seems to be in code, and Eliza spends six hours bent over her lexicon, a sheaf of note paper in one loose fist. Eventually she gives up, and calls collect, but nobody answers, not even Utmar, whose job it is to answer the phone. That night Eliza wakes from a dream about the children next door standing beside her bed with birds in their mouths, bone-colored viscera falling onto her white carpet. She calls out something in a dead language, but of course, nobody is there to hear her, and nobody would understand anyway.

When Sergei left he had taken his shaving kit, his mother's photograph, and a portrait of his family's House God, which he had carried with him ever since a landmine had gone off in his village and destroyed everything. Eliza remembers hating that portrait, fearing it, the

hundred arms and matted, blind faces. She remembers begging Sergei to remove it from their bedroom, and he relented, hanging it in the foyer instead, though he did not understand her desperation, her terror at something he believed to be integral to his person. But now it is gone entirely, and there is something missing about the house, though Eliza doesn't really believe in theoi, thinks worship is wasteful and obscene.

She wakes up one morning and there is a letter from her sister resting on her pillow, but she cannot bear to open it just now, not in the morning when her tongue is heavy with a curling, grained agony, and she can only fold into herself and remember the last time she was sad, and remember the last time she remembered.



### III.

Once the fire trucks had crawled back, yawning, to the fire station, Ebba and I went into the dining room, to sit at the table and come up with a reason for me to stay. She brought me olives in a green bowl she had made herself, and played with the button on her cuff. The awls and the thread which made up her work spun onto the table and the floor, an eddy of construction, moving inwards and spiraling without reason. Always, while we were speaking, her eyes traced eager and discerned over the fabric and paper, erecting a shadow in her head as immense as a city. Her loom was in her studio, and she had shown me its form, had tried to explain its skins and inner workings.

As I reached for a book she had left propped open on the table, the white basin full of House God wobbled, its shape as thin and pure as a Japanese bowl, the same reflective glow in the water, as if it were not water at all, and perhaps it wasn't. They had lived here for centuries, from before the apartment had even been built, before iron had been hewn from the Earth and the world was a shallow pool. Their care was included in the lease agreement, and Ebba did not mind. She and her roommates took turns dropping coins into the bowl, pricking their fingers on the full moon.

"Aren't you afraid They'll die?" I said, pressing the tip of my finger against the smooth skin of the water, letting the surface bend, but not break. The House God bumped Their one-

eyed bodies gently, rolling over in vague ellipses. I did not ask where Their portrait was, or if there ever was one.

Ebba shrugged, the white collared shirt falling down over her shoulder, an action that seemed to have a divine, ecclesiastic counterpart, but I could not remember what it was. “They’ve never died before,” she said. She did not think of Gods when she built the worlds and houses of her imagination. She was not afraid to go out at night. She knew how to light fires without matches, how to knock the gas burner back into place.

#### IV.

The house is mere tomb now, and Isabella endures on a chair in the center of the kitchen with her chin jutted out, defiant, wild. She was not born here, and she does not remember the initial scission which tore her from there. She has never seen a God die before, and it was purposeful and glorious, and it was by her hands.

Isabella's fine blond hair, cut to the line of her jaw the way children's hair is always cut, sticks to the side of her face, matted with blood, but she does not cry. She cannot cry, though she wants to, shakes with the effort to keep her mouth shut and her eyes open: if she were to cry she would not be able to hear the banshee wailing deep from the heart of the house, and it could surprise her, reappear in the clinical maw of the kitchen without giving her time to prepare. Isabella tightens the cords of her neck, resists the urge to scratch her leg, trembles from standing for so long without rest.

The house has always been a tomb to Isabella, though only now has this impression, nursed by a hundred unspoken assurances, become literalized. The wood floors are a dark, rich cherry, as are the banisters and the furniture, which curl in the knotted, serpentine fashion that seems to trap light inside. The ceilings are high, made all the higher by immense windows and long, cactus-textured curtains: the walls are hung with tapestries, as if Isabella and her mother lived in an Italian monastery, not a suburban home in upstate New York. On every heavy, stone

mantle there is a portrait of the House God, or the creature which had once been the House God, each one exacting a different aspect of His character, an angle of His divinity.

Isabella's mother had purchased this house for the simple perfection of its House God. She exacted elaborate and expensive rituals, detailing His reactions to each tender offering in a leather-bound journal, sometimes disappearing into their basement for days: Isabella is given a set of porcelain dolls to play with, and is careful never to touch anything.

Just as Isabella begins to sag against the stern back of the chair does the hideous wailing from within the house become louder, closer. It has moved from the elaborate shrine constructed in their basement, thumping wildly up the stairs, rounding the long, wainscoted hallways, always howling, like a trap full of skin. Isabella straightens: she has been sharpening her nerves for hours, and she does not tremble when her mother collapses through the door of the kitchen, pelt cracked, eyes clay-red, hair the matted wildness of a priest's, and the tears, the terrible, animal wailing.

"You!" Her mother hisses, hunched, one crabbed hand clutching at the doorway, supporting her broken form. Her clothes hang in tatters around her bone shoulders, and Isabella can see the scars of fingernails coursing over her breasts and stomach. "You monster! Murderer! Murderer!"

Isabella stands still as a city, empty of thought. "You are evil. You are evil!" Her mother throws back her head and shrieks, slamming her head against the doorframe, over and over. Isabella knows not to say anything. She has suffered this torment before, for speaking out of

turn, for shattering a precious rarity, and she can only hope that it will pass, that her mother will grow tired of hysteria and return to the world of the living, even if her God will not. Once more her mother dashes down to the subterranean center of the house, her heavy, lupine footfalls echoing through the silence of the grave.

A line of blood drags itself down Isabella's cheek, but she does not lift her hand.

V.

After the party, which never should have happened, my mother wraps everything in plastic, a rich, scavenging gesture. Nothing wastes in her home, and we are in her home, the dominion she has razed and raised and will raze again. She did not grow up with things to waste—she wandered up the coast like a stone lodged in a fox’s teeth, the same hungry expression, the same coughing laugh. I drop table scraps into the drain and can hear our House God chewing, deep within the pipes, the snap and snap of His sinew beak: King Turtle.

“I don’t know why we do these things,” my mother says, allowing complicity. “Nobody ever eats anything, and I never have a nice time.”

My sister spits pomegranate seeds from her wild perch on the counter, spitting onto the floor, spitting into my hair. “I don’t know why either,” she says. “I don’t like people coming over.” She spits a seed into the drain and King Turtle rumbles, and our mother smacks my sister’s knee with the fat of her palm. She never lived anywhere with a House God, not even a roosting one, like the swarm that took over our attic, its nest a nightmare my sister and I had had together—the next day the whole house was filled with a wild hum.

“He likes it,” my sister says, sullen and wild, spitting again into the drain, and I laugh at the noise He makes, though I know I shouldn’t. Our mother taught us to be afraid of the Gods, or maybe she didn’t, and I am remembering wrong. I remember my sister and I living in the woods for weeks at a time, a whole linguistic tradition forming beneath us, a whole cycle

enacted and retreated from. We knew of Gods in the familiar nods of fellow animals, in the bared glares of greater predators, and then stumbling home, our mother tearing up pages of our picture books and throwing them into the drain—we taught ourselves to read, or maybe we didn't.

Our mother bends down to pick up the seeds my sister has thrown, cupping them in a soft hand. "You girls have no idea how lucky you are," she says with bitter mourning. "I lived many places when I was a child, many places, but I never had a House God. Not once. You are very lucky girls." I remember her holding us by the wrist, her grip white, both of us crying, looking into our eyes and promising to feed us to King Turtle if we stayed rough, stayed bad. I don't remember being bad at all.

In the cavern of our sink, I can hear Him scratching at the seals which keep Him soft and sallow, perfectly good. My mother wipes her hands on her dress, sighs, and drops a coin into the drain, before going upstairs to lie in bed, unable to sleep until the blue hours of morning. My sister and I listen to Him chewing, cracking the metal between His muscle jaws, and are silent, though we used to say nothing at all and still be understood...

## VI.

She is home alone again, and in a house as small as theirs that is an absence felt in the stomach, not the mind. Her brother, God-damn him, is swimming with his friends at the quarry, their bodies the masculine contours which Attila hates with an acid longing. Her mother is at work at the radio station, and will call in an hour to ensure the air conditioner was turned off when she left. Her step-father today is not a person, and so Attila is alone, and so she decides, in the natural gesture which boredom flattens and folds into uncomplicated forms, to make bread.

It is not that Attila has always known how to make bread, but that when she was first taught every word from the baker's mouth slotted into premade shapes within her, and she could think only "Yes, yes it is so!" Here is the divine. Attila mixes the yeast into her Pyrex measuring cup, and she does not measure the temperature of the water, and she does not have to. Her hands are her hands when they are coated in flour, when they are folding salt and water into the cavernous structure which will, by some alchemic process, become dough, and so it does. The ease of miracle is the greatest catalyst of reverence. Attila holds the life she has made up to her cheek and lets the light pass through.

Her spirit will not be ready for some hours. With nothing else to do, Attila begins making butter, begins boiling water. It is the mugged kind of summer, the kind of summer that snakes around the throat and fills the hollow of the mouth and she longs to swim at the quarry, to walk



along the river without any shoes. The carton of cream is sweaty in her hands, and she wonders if it will escape her, shatter open and then she will have something to do. For what else is there? If anyone were to look at her in the light right now, standing with her imperial hip jutted to the side and her arms crossed, they would exclaim that she is the most human figure ever made, carved from the thing no man has touched.

Attila wraps the first slice of bread in clean wax paper and begins the descent to her basement furnace. It is always hot down here, and Attila's vision stutters for a moment, as if pages have been torn from the book of today. She offers her gift at the small altar before the furnace, and hastens up the stairs before the vent shudders open, and the sureness fades, and the basement fills with a fire that does not burn...

*Red God*

I.

She receives a letter from her sister, but all it says is “One day you will wake up and forget to be sad.” Eliza sits at her desk, pearl-handled letter opener in one loose hand, and ponders that. Did her sister see this on television, and think that Eliza needed to hear it? Why did she not use the phone?

Now every morning Eliza wakes up and wonders if she’d forgotten to be sad, and then wonders if that, because her first thought is to ask if she’s forgotten, maybe she isn’t sad at all. Maybe when she remembers to be sad she is only remembering the last time she remembered, and each day she gets further and further from real sadness. It’s been twenty years, she reasons, sitting at her kitchen table with her grapefruit, her grapefruit spoon. It would be odd to remember that sadness after all this time—she doesn’t remember much else. Of course she remembers Sergei, but what if she is only remembering the last time she remembered?

She gets a letter from a sister that says “There are no good things,” and quietly, Eliza agrees.

Her neighbors, whose windows she can see into while she eats breakfast, have been married seventeen years, twice as long as she ever was. They have three children, all of whom are beautiful in strange, ugly ways, like totems in a museum, stolen from old places. The two youngest ones come over if it is raining, and Eliza gives them small, oriental bananas and tries to remember which one is older. They’re only a year apart, she knows, and they are so different

looking that it is impossible to gauge which features are the mark of immaturity and which are the permanent outlines of personhood.

She knows they are the creatures who have been killing her birds, and now her garden is silent every morning while she eats breakfast and looks out the window, trying to forget and remember.

## II.

The Red God, the fire-eater, She who puts the candles out, slithers away to Her secret grotto, a giant of corneous scales and spiraling horns. Sweet, night-seeing eyes look up through the water, never blinking, blurry unknown shapes shivering above Her, like the lights of a fearsome heaven. She has been alive forever. She has seen these things before. When the land first shook with a human tremor, when the air first rang with a bullet shot, when the water grew murky and hard as ice, The Red God was there, curled in Her sea cave and swirling a fire between Her teeth.

When The Red God was born She crawled from the body of the Earth with a coal in Her mouth, Her wild head reeling, and a thousand others like Her galloped from the center and demanded air. It cannot be known how She ever feels, or if the wet rumblings within Her can truly be known as feelings, but She felt then, clawing Her way over a stag-headed Theós in Her thirst, Her hunger, Her pounding need for blessed light. It was a feeling of elation, a feeling of surety, and She knew that She was one among many, and that She and those like Her would rule the world.

And She has ruled! She has eaten! She has killed! She has had many children, pushed them bloody and helpless from Her reptile womb, and they looked like their fathers, and She ate them all! She hates the smell of new Gods, the ones who came from Her body and not the oiled center of eternity, the ones who howl and carry the twisted limbs of their parents. No pups

live—their scent is putrid and wrong, and if She did not eat them, another would. But She does not regret the loss, perhaps regrets nothing, perhaps has no memory of the past and no ability to remember. She hates the smell of sex, hates the taste of cock, hates the feeling of another's eyes looking into Her, and Her eyes looking back.

She hates the way the sun scratches at Her dry skin, how Her nails have grown brittle with age.

### III.

Squinting through the thin slats of his naval helmet, he can see the shore, and he can see the fire. "Set the course, men," he shouts with military prophecy, "and pull the motor aboard!" He is the captain of this fireboat, the Mystic battalion and light house brigade. He is a soldier of the dry night, and his nose is lined always with the smell of oil and the taste of smoke, and the town sleeps still because of him. In the morning, in the evening, he sits ready and wanting, playing koum-kan with the solipsists of his crew, going to sleep with his boots on. In the morning, in the evening, he gets the hallowed call, the ringing bell, and a fire is chewing the coastline. The fire house is a shaking, klaxon kingdom. The bell is ringing, and his shoes are still untied.

When the bell rings his shoes are still untied and his eyes are heavy and dark. The desire to lay down his spear and descend into surrender, sweet sleep, is greater than any submarine that he has boarded, but he has slayed them all. The fire is growing, reflected in the dark ocean, and the down feathers in his comforter have begun to smoke. First he puts on his jacket. Then he puts on his helmet. Then he is climbing aboard, barking orders to his armored crew, turning the engine and bringing water to fire. Before them, who was it who kept the Earth unsoldered? Who awoke in the early dawn when the bell was ringing, when the world was a pocket of flame? When the soldiers of the night charged into the village centers, who loaded their harpoon guns and did not miss?

Squinting through the smoke of his fireboat, he can see the dock, the fire, and the city wild. The hose is unspooled from its golden winches, the pump lowered in the sea by a blessed litany of gloved hands. The people on the dock cry out, leaping into the waves like stars falling from the sky and going out. Their bodies float limp and charred in the black water, and he seals them from his mind. There are other terrors he must capture, and other fears growing at the corners of his vision, as he primes his harpoon gun, and rests his boot upon the helm.

His men are diving into the sea, pulling survivors to land. The smell of burnt flesh is thicker than the smoke, thicker than the dense rubber coating of his helmet, and he remembers, suddenly, the smell of the landmine which killed his brother, only three years ago.

Every shadow is surely the enemy he seeks, the submarine his Captain told him of and which he still reveres, and he raises his fist to the sky and spits into the storm, "Who did this!"



#### IV.

From Ebba's bedroom window we could look out and watch the fire of the laundromat—she had called me excitedly and said “Come over! There's a fire!” and I had put on my white tennis shoes and sprinted to her apartment. “Let me in!” I yelled over the murder of the fire-siren, and she yelled back that the door was unlocked. I had wanted her to throw me the key from her window, so I could watch her hands, the windup, the catch and release.

When I got up to her bedroom she was sitting in the open window, watching the fire and drinking water from a jar. I told her that my water was still shut off and she told me, very close to my ear, that she stole her water from the library, arrived with a canvas bag full of jam jars and honey jars and other jars and stole it from the water cooler. The fire melted the snow before it landed, and we tried to open the rest of the windows, but they were burned shut.

She told me about the books she was making—she was done with stone, was done with installations, and now she would make books for her roommates to fill with their drawings. Yes, they were all artists, and they lived above a restaurant in a sloped-ceiling wide-window apartment, and they had lived across from the laundromat, but now they lived across from the fire, and soon they would live across an empty lot that nobody would remember being anything other than a graveyard of oil and coal.

There was a prayer on my tongue, but it belonged to no God I knew, and all I could do was catch the collar of her shirt between my ashen fingers. I had wanted to be an artist fervently

and deliriously when I was younger, writing furious decrees in my sketchbook with bricks of charcoal, but sitting across from Ebba, who burned from the inside with a hollow glow, it seemed like there was enough art in the world.

V.

They meet at a bath in the Northern part of Greece, the air heavy with the minerals which promised longevity and power, soft skin and inner being. Eliza was there because she was beautiful like the furnished blush of a calf skin shoe, and because her friends had begged her to come—Sergei was there because his knee had become swollen and inflamed, as it always did in humid season, when the doors have to be forced open with a heavy fist and every stuttered breath feels like drowning. Like her father, he had served in the war, but in the Navy, The Fire Brigade, and his knee was not the only injury she would find, later that night, when they could not think of any more questions to ask each other.

Was he handsome? He had made a joke, about the water in the bath being green, colored by the coins, and in joking his face looked young and soft like the burnished flush of a calf's skin. Eliza asked why he didn't just pick the coins out, and laughed at the expression he had made, his mouth a clean white 'o.' They spoke cleanly and gently in Greek. Eliza knew the woman he was with was his wife. He knew Eliza had not yet graduated, that the people she was with were her roommates, and thus, inconsequential.

For a couple of weeks as a child, her father had decreed that she and her sister would attend Worship, in order to be schooled in the practicalities of the local Gods, both physical and spiritual. In his mind, his daughters would become shrine maidens, and their days would be spent in the morphological simplicity of ritual, carrying pails of castor oil to the sacred chasms

and the divine tiles—what greater life could there be than one such as these? Eliza and her sister would paint their nails in the shadow of Kissamos's cypresses, their instructor's voice reaching them in a sonorous hum. Eliza remembers, specifically, the day spent in the chapel, the floor still littered with white shreds of paper. A wedding. Suddenly Eliza was thinking about her own wedding, in some distant future, a thought which grows like a dawn-starved star, filling her up with the nascaret light of hope.

The lesson of that day was focused on marriage, its rights and structures within the system of Theof to whom this region belonged. But Eliza and her sister had lived too many places, had seen too many things from behind the night of their beetle green sunglasses, and so they reacted scornfully to the teachings of the area. Eliza spat a cough drop into the spine of one holy book, taking a perverse glee in how the words would become slurred by the sticky surface. Behind its glass interior she could

barely read those distorted rituals: her sister giggles at her boldness, and at the images of the cycle Gods, lovers taken at specific hours, one becoming the other, children becoming adults becoming lovers becoming together.

Neither Eliza nor her sister emerged believers, but it did not matter. By that time their father had moved on to dreams of them becoming professional tennis players, an ambition which would prove more rewarding for all. And yet, on wet, hot days, like this one, Eliza feels a snug

affection for those pastoral teachings, the idea that she and her husband would be one, just as the Theoí were one, the many becoming singular, each emerging from the same rock of the Earth. There are no Gods that give birth—at least, none in that area of Greece where Eliza and her sister were children—and she likes that too, admires it, sees the ancient fists of singular creatures from the window of a train and longs for something she can't name.

She thinks of that feeling now, while she leans into his strong, square face, tipping her head back into a white laugh, taking a coin from his cupped palm and letting it fall.

## VI.

The creature, the fire-eater, floats between the cragged teeth of the sea bed, letting the dark water sooth the scars which decorate Her stomach. They are like medals; the talismans of a war She does not remember serving in. Her memory is a garment of trauma, and from its stitches She has learned to hide, to crawl towards flames only at night, under cover of smoke. Her subjects no longer light fires at Her altars, do not worship at a flame wrapped in stone, and so She has learned to starve, to sustain the galaxy of Herself on yellow drops of candle light. In the horned mound of Her breast lodges a bullet, and the shriek She uttered at its entry can still be heard on days where the wind is still.

She is careful now. She does not leave the sea.

When She first smells shivers of the fire She is floating on her back, letting the water take Her. Her wanting belly rumbles, and the creature begins to convulse wildly, Her gular flap white with foam, bubbles rising to the surface and the birds call out, for they know danger. They have watched the darkness of the grotto with careful terror, for while the beast inside it has not been seen in many years, they know this means only a greater desperation to Her hunger: She will never die. The birds wheel wildly above the harsh inlet, and theirs is the chorus which The creature surfaces to, Her black eyes dilated and sightless, Her bulbous salamander tail rising like a periscope and pushing Her through the sea. She does not think of anything. There is a fire in the water. She can smell it with Her tongue.

But the creature knows She must be careful. Her subjects have learned to harm Her, and they no longer leave baskets of hot coals on the beach for Her to swallow at the coming of the dawn, before returning to the sea to sleep, to hunt. She knows, and yet, now, the fire huge above Her, She finds that Her claws have ascended the dock before Her mind, that Her jaw has unhinged itself and revealed the triplicate teeth inside. Distantly She can hear the screams of Her lost cult echoing around Her, and Her eyes, pained by the sudden brightness, can see the vague outlines of terror, which flee the black hole of Herself and cry out as they do so: She thinks only of the fire. She has not eaten in years, has lain in the slick protection of Her grotto half-dead and all hungry, has not tasted God flesh in almost centuries, has not spoken Her own language in nearly as long...

The fire dies the way we all do. There is no descent into darkness, like sleep, like dreams. She is hungry, shimmering in the inferno of instinct, charging through the night with Her eyes open, with Her mouth open. She is dead, torn by a silver harpoon, Her four hearts stopping as one, all at once.

*God*



1.

Once there was a drop of ice in the Earth, and this drop of ice was the Earth, and the Earth encompassed this drop of ice. The Earth was part of a larger system of ice drops, and the ice drop was part of a larger system of Earths, and both were completely unique, and they were also infinite. Sometimes there were shadows in the ice, and these shadows had shadows of their own, and one of these shadows was me, and one of them was Sejeu. Sejeu was a soft cotton ruff, long limbs, and one sleepy eye. I was a woman with dark hair.

In my shadow, which was my own, I built a city from metallic sand. In its center I lifted a basilica with thirty flying buttresses adorning its façade like the limbs of a centipede, four auroch spires, and one Rose window, engraved with a secret image. These numbers were all significant. The rest of the city I built in a single evening, spiraling out from the basilica, not only on a lateral plane, but on a linear one, spinning upwards and underground in an urban gyroscope. If I had a greater mind for machines I would have set my city in motion, affixing each piece to a pendulum, spring, or tourbillion, alight from gravitational bias, spinning and balanced and eternal. The buildings were varied in style but unified in theme. The theme of my city was carved into the cornerstones, along with the date and my personal rune. I make a house with a wide porch and real windows and set it aside for my mother, and I wait for her there.

But the city, when abandoned on my retreats to the inner sanctum of the basilica, expands and multiplies on its own, climbing up the orbital boundaries of my shadow. It becomes multi-

stratumed, connected by loose, threadlike monorails and elevated trains. The houses sprout balconies and palisades, courtyards and tenement gatehouses. I stumble into black-sand mews, marked with a new date and a foreign rune, the roosts scratched by a flock of lost eyasses. “Where did this come from?” I say in a humid dialog, a new speech I had invented, the cases still raw and barbed in my throat. “What does this mean?” No answer comes.

In the city forum, where the fountain spits black sand at thirty-three thousand feet, I think I see the shadows of these unseen others, and though I duck into the same alleys and passages as the footsteps’ echoes, the city forms new shapes around me, and I am lost. *I built you,* I want to say, but I have not invented those words yet. *You cannot keep secrets from me.* The center is constantly shifting: I no longer know my way home.



*White God*

I.

There is no White God in Berlin anymore, and today marks fifty years exactly. There have always been fewer Gods in Europe, at least since the war, and so there are more churches, the delicate kind made of seashell flesh and ochre powder. There are none of the stone totems and wooden idols George and his sister would find and destroy in the woods, crushed between two stones. He calls his sister that evening and asks if she has heard from their father, if she gone and seen the skulls, and she tells him no, no, she has been going to breakfast, to the Pergamon, to nightclubs guarded by codes. He asks her if she has been taking her medication, and she hangs up the phone.

There is no White God in Berlin anymore, and the shrinking eyelets who crawl through His bleached ribs made quick work of His legacy. Singular in perfection was the Weißer Gott, larger than the high peak border. The people built the city around Him, seven-hundred years ago, and the soft blues and purples of His body colored the hovels and the apartment buildings. My uncle flips his paper over so he can see His picture better—the pylon legs curled beneath His body, one mouth large as a star, six eyes which punctuated the center of His face, as regular and blind as the pommels of a Stormtrooper. Yes, George thinks to himself, bringing the paper closer to his face, his glasses fogging with breath— *it's no wonder He died*. There is no place for Gods in this world of ice, or so he believes.

The accounts of Berlin worship scatter, divided over linguistic discrepancies, deposed leaders, the charred fingertips of black bombs and sabotage. Prevailing, like most sects, the treatises were ones of permanence and stability. Continuous worship. To be as immediate and present as the shadow of The White God. To be immovable, to trust that there will always be an always. There is no mention of coins and vessels—when God is always present there is no need to appease the space where He should be.

When The White Blood of Berlin drained away it was silent and extraordinary—one eye shut and one bombed dropped and no others opened. The city stank for months of flesh, chewed apart by thieves and radicals, and it was only out of a strange and unnamable guilt that the city chose to keep His bones in their place, to suffer the stench.

## II.

Edelpha of the cave. Edelpha of the mountain range. Edelpha, concubine of the White God, He who takes our daughters in the night. Bar the door and seal the windows with wax, for there is no worse fate than that of Edelpha's, poor saint of the stolen. She sleeps on a bed of straw, she weeps in a gown of bamboo linen, she writes letters in stones and throws them from her prison peak—they're never found. In the night the village square echoes with her cries, they say, but it could be the winter wind, or a butcher's herd at the slaughter. They say her sisters still travel the mountain passes with their spiked boots and alpenstocks, but they have not yet found the cave where Edelpha lies, and now it is beginning to snow, and now it's time to go home.

On days of real agony Edelpha leans over the ledge and imagines herself there, dashed among the rocks like a wild crab! Her fingernails are cracked and they litter the cave and her eyes are bruised! Her throat is raw from crying! Her stomach is full of God-sweat and cum!

On ordinary days, Edelpha tends the Master's goats and boils milk over a fire that never goes out. She wears a goat skin doublet and does not think about where it came from. The sky is clear, no clouds, and the snow crunches beneath her boots, the same way it had when she was a child, when she played in the yard outside her father's kiln, the snow tinted red with lost glaze. The goats press their soft faces into her hands, and she has named them all, has delivered them into life from their mothers, and their mothers too. She runs her fingers through their

matted curls and whispers to them in a language she still remembers, songs and poems and gentle koans.

But every night, good or bad, The Master returns to the cave on His hands and knees, His fat eye unblinking, His white mouths open and full of spit, filled with hard tongues, and Edelpha presses her body as far into the cave wall as she can, feeling it push back against her girl skin, calling out for her mother, for her sisters, for footprints arcing over the snow and the day coming to a close...



### III.

The storm begins with a word and an unintelligible, accompanying gesture. The animals who live in the fields raise their noses and it smells like lightning. The animals who live in the trees call out to one another, gathering themselves in the darkness, bristling their fur. The strange creatures who live in the roots say a word, and make an unintelligible, accompanying gesture, and the storm begins.

He has been wandering the dark woods, collecting mushrooms for a trap he will set tomorrow, a system of ropes and pulleys of his own creation. The mushrooms in his cloth pouch are white capped, soft skinned. They are those known to be desired most by the denizens of the forest, the twisted creatures whose flesh is prized above all others. He fingers his wooden cudgel in a familiar, habitual manner, the way one pushes their hair out of their eyes, or buttons a shirt that has slid off their shoulders. Fear in the black lipped forest is welcomed, for there is a comfort in it, as if he were returning to a dream which has awakened him every night in a cold fever, his straw pallet soaked in sweat.

And then the storm begins.

At first the rain falls in hard white stones, and they land in his eyes, and he rubs angrily at his face, and he is a child again, held down in the field by his terrible brothers, calling for his mother when the night begins. The familiar whorls and cambers of the forest are twisted, warped around the features of the unknown, as if the threads of a screw had suddenly become

reversed, the water ceasing to flow from the pumps and the plants withering. From the shadows he feels dark eyes watching him, or perhaps they are only reflections of his own pale face, and he does not know, and he is afraid.

At the peak of his terror, his frenzy, the heavens scream with their greatest creation yet, and a white bolt of lightning crashes in front of him, and he believes he has summoned it from the inner catacombs of his human soul. A boundless oak is suddenly ignited, like a witch's pyre, an angel's fiery sword. For a moment it hangs, bright as sin, before it collapses, shattering the earth before him, sending dirt and nettles into the air and the noise. Echoing forever.

He does not want to scream, so he does not, or maybe it is that he has never stopped screaming and he no longer realizes; that the cords of his throat have become stretched into a new form, a being of fear.

He is found in the morning curled in the hollow of a green beech tree, and the ecstasy that glimmers from his dark eyes is beautiful and bivariate. The village no longer knocks on his door, no longer offers to play cards or hunt crabs, but he does not notice. He stares out the window of his hovel, remembers the storm.

#### IV.

This will be the call to heaven, he knows: this will be the thing which makes the name Malovov slot itself into the echoing din of permanence. He writes in the Major key, jubilant and vivid, the choir and the organ engaging in easy, conversational harmony for which his disciples

long. All day they sit at their pine wood bureaus and blot the line paper with their fountain pens. When Malovov returns from his two-hour lunch of pink spirits and white meat, he jeers at their efforts, and he retreats to the back room, and the sounds which emerge from the locked door are enough to break the bones one's smallest finger.

Sometimes Malovov says he is writing about Audre Matias, the knight and lover of Ivan the Bold, who slayed The White God with a bolt of yellow lightning he summoned from within his human soul. Sometimes Malovov says, foam flicking the edges of his beard and his eyes red rimmed, he is writing about The Kumir Himself, breath ringing like klaxons of thunder. They say that when "Hymn to the White God" is finally completed and performed in the Royal Concert Hall, and the soprano hits her dizzying high C, The White Night will return from the dizzying cap of heaven and blanket St. Petersburg, His white fur clean as snow, nudging His immense snout to the spires of the palace, paws in the canal. But Malovov will have to complete it first.

Sometimes when he is in his favorite, dim lit, café, head thrown back against the torn upholstery, the young man who works the bar begins to whistle Ed Barrow's glistening saxophone solo from "Canal God Blues." Malovov remembers when that recording first alighted in St. Petersburg, remembers being fourteen and sitting on the bed he shared with all three of his brothers, listening to the wicked heaviness of the altered Dominant seventh chord, the solo extending for thirty-two bars, and the air inside Malovov's blood had frozen, and he had called out to his eldest brother "Peter, I am dying!" Pleasure and revulsion are separated by a thread: Malovov has known this since his first piano recital, the shame of his too large suit and the fire

mark on his temple seeming to grow in tandem with each shivering, perfect note he struck. His mother swore she had seen the shadow of something from the window of the church, tipping its head to listen.

When Malovov finishes this piece, the Gods themselves will sing along, and they will curl outside the concert halls in animal approximation, hunger sated. When Malovov finishes this glass he will go back to work, and already his head is humming with bright melodies. He cannot imagine, here in his tender squalor, that one day his hymn will be used to draw the divine from their secret grottos into the barrel of a gun. He will never ride in the cab of a semi-truck and see a God appear on the highway, too fast to be avoided. He does not know he is nothing but a story I have written, cannot conceive of a world without Gods, and so he does not, holding the sherry in his mouth and listening to the bartender whistling as he works: human music.

V.

Yum! It is a hot day in dogwood winter, and I am born in the dirt! “Who left this baby here?” the people of the village wonder, cradling me in their human hands while I scream the high yellow note of joy. “Who left this baby in the dirt?” A representative is chosen among them, and they strap me to his back in a white-blue sling, and every woman in the village presses their lips to my noble brow, and every child waves goodbye. My guide says no words, but grips his cudgel in cautious fists and jumps at the noises in the trees. The pass is not a traveled one, and his rough boots are caught by roots and thorns, but still he is silent: the forest and I are loud.

At last, on my second day of air since my eternity of dirt, we reach the end of the pass. My guide lifts me into his arms and calls out “Zatheers of the forest, is this baby yours?” And from the edges of the clearing they came, green fur bristling, white eyes open, throbbing and chewing at each other’s shoulder blades and inner thighs, smelling of spit, of lavender. “Is this baby yours?” my guide asks again, but now his voice is shaking, and as one beast approaches on her mighty belly, five simian arms dragging the holy bulk of herself, he begins to weep, and to say words that I recognize as prayers, and I say them as well in my clean new voice. I was no God’s baby. They let us be.

My guide takes me to his seaside shack and gives me to my mother. “My baby,” she says, and so I was. She wrapped my hands in clean white linens and brushed my wolf hair back. My guide returned to the beach to dig for clams, to hide secrets in the earth. One day he would take me with him, and I would become the clam digger, but for now my kingdom was the dirt, and

I carried my kingdom with me—open my tiny fist and see the land inside! Come into the back yard, the space given to me by my mother and a wire fence—we can dig for wild onions; you can tell me my name.

“My baby,” says my mother, rubbing dirt from my fine face. “All I have is already yours.”



*Blue God*



I.

“What you’ll never know,” she says, “is how blue air can be. I lived all alone up there—I was a current in a hot house, a cool blue stream of air. You are lucky I love you all so much, that I take the time every morning to brush the hair back from your eyes, because I grew up in a house all alone, and the only voice in the day was a blue-tongued God on the telephone, ‘Honey, when can I come over?’ He would call as soon as my mother had left the house, and the door would close hollow on the back of her heel and the phone would ring, would raise its matted head into the silence and ring.

“My mother was a painter, a painter and a sailor and a killer. My father—who’s to say. Who’s to say. Sometimes the Blue God would call me from His sunken perch and say my father was in the woods, was sucking dicks in the woods, and I would hang up the phone, but the woods were empty. He told me that my father was creature from the center of the Earth who ate creatures from the center of the Earth and would crawl from the center of the Earth and eat me in the woods. He told me He had a blue tongue, like a Tuscan pool, and I could hear it over the telephone, touching the receiver.

“But the thing is how blue the air was. I brought my books to the woods, brought my crayons to the woods, heard the phone ring from our three walled home and left Carolina in the woods. ‘I’m coming over,’ the Blue God snarled. ‘I’m putting on my boots, and I’m climbing out of my well, and I’ll be there before the sun has set.’”

## II.

No greater abjection than the toil of the crab fisherman. In the dust beneath his unmade bed he pretends that he is one glowing astral body and one glowing astral nothing and one divine collection of random divines which he does not know, and one day will be me. His alarm will whisper that Five A.M. has woken, and he will crawl from his sepulcher and dress in the dark; he will don the canvas pants and waterproof boots of devotion. His hair shirt is a white wool sweater, knit by hands he knows. His desires are tactile, inimitable, unintelligible pictures. He is aware that the mornings run cold, but he does not.

The purchase of his crab trap arrived in a series of visions, like those described by sects and saints and are now the objects which signal a complete mental collapse or a coming personal depravity. The rope which moors his boat is woven by hands in a pink sea village, but the line he tied himself. He unravels shapes made in another dark day with a full throated feeling that can be called only “ecstasy.”

When suspended the crab trap is a box, held aloft by four nylon ropes affixed to the wire edges, a checkerboard pattern the sea can seep through. It is a collapsible device, a mobile prison. When it lies flat it lies flat, patience gathering a fine sediment over the cross pattern, indiscernible from the ocean floor. The crabs will wander drunkenly to this invisible rebar, lured by the smell of cold meat. He baits his trap with chicken legs, thirty-three cents a pound, a number which surely has some significance, in some way or another.

He rows his boat himself. In twelve hours he can have many thoughts, illiterate though he is, staring handsome and unkind into the water before turning his boat around. In twelve hours he can catch some thirty odd crabs, blue as souls.

The sun will tremble, Five P.M. cracking open over the mountains, and he returns to the shack where he eats and prays, where the bed is still unmade. The crabs boil all at once, though he cannot eat as many as he catches in a day. The remains he pours from the shingled angle of his roof, and he hears the cats rejoicing well into the night and sometimes, when he wakes again to the burr of his alarm clock, they are screaming still.

My father sleeps on top of his bed, beneath a white comforter and close to the wall. He does not imagine that he is carrying a great stone upon his back, that he is greatly misplaced in a way he cannot describe. He does not dream. He does not moan in his sleep, kicking the blankets off. He does not lie on the floor curled in his own reveries, dropping coins into bowls of still water and begging for the day to end.

### III.

When they meet for the first time, in the spectre of some stranger's party, he kills a snake that has crawled through the pipes, and she thinks he could only be a dream. His arm is in a cast, and his eyes are black, and when she asks what he has done, how he has happened, he smiles with the left side of his face and says nothing. Always when she sees him, all in white on the virtued lawn, the first word which comes to her mind is "God Killer," an antique word she remembers from church, and it reminds her of shoe polish, and it reminds her of home. His hair is long and his clothes are torn, and when he asks her where she's from, how she has happened, she smiles with the left side of her face and says nothing.

At night, in his cement box studio, the stories he tells are so exact to her imagination she wonders if he has made them up specifically for her: sailboats, nursemaids, a protracted journey in the desert in search of Zen. A pastoral ease seeps from his skin like wood smoke, and she worries she will choke on it, just as she chokes on every pull of a cigarette and every truthful word. Who could stomach her, coarse snakebite that she is? She does not tell him about eating blocks of yeast as a child, of the horse her grandfather owned, who she would ride bareback over the hills of Carolina and feed apples from her hand. She tells him her mother is also a painter. She tells him how blue the air was.

In dark lit moments she imagines that the stories he tells her are her own, that it is she who grew up nestled in New England reverie, her hair bobbed and her shirts white and clean. Yes, it is she who spent summers in Maine, drinking clear water on the wide porch, while white

light filtered in through the windows and the ocean hummed! It is she who traveled to New Orleans in a borrowed car, letting the highway wrap around her throat. Nowhere is the dirty child who slept in the same bed as her mother, while her father raged in California and slurred Communist literature, and the phone rang in the middle of the night...

But then she remembers her dog, who followed her into the woods and got fleas in autumn. She remembers her books, her name printed on each inside cover. She remembers the summer, the air sticky and the tobacco plants flowering. White and clean.

#### IV.

Words have always been a peril: the gnarled shape, the hard bone shape, which gets caught in his throat like a knot. When Eli was a child, I am told, he did not speak until long after everyone else had, and he sat in the back of his classes, and he did not say a word. He did not read until his hair was as long and tangled as the roots of our mother's willow tree, and one day a bolt of lightning came and drove the tree into the ground, and from that moment my brother could read. His words came from a clipped tongue, like polished stones. His handwriting is cramped and shambolic, like a child's.

Still: he has survived. He has aged. He has found his way to the copper-plated tunnels of academia, where he may speak and read in ways no one ever thought he could. Gone is the quivering, red lipped child who said nothing and played with heavy, wooden trains, clicking them together into one long caravan across the kitchen floor. Now Eli sits in wide-windowed excellence, translating Chinese script from the skin of the original, tasting each character as if it were a fruit grown in water. He loves each with a tender absolution, but his favorite is *ma*, which, depending on the tone, means either horse, or mother. It reminds him of the yellow room our mother writes her letters in, letters he does not return. Every character reminds him of a room: some are clear images from childhood, our grandmother's sewing room, the hospice where our uncle died. Some are imagined, and have no human counterpart.

His area of study is an obscure one, so arcane he has long given up trying to explain it in any language, translated or otherwise. The most he can say is that it has to do with space, and

the space language forms from shape, its physical, corporeal shape. But it is more than that. It is something neither English, nor Chinese, nor any of their corresponding dialects, can fully encompass. He works late into the night, slaving over each word, his pen scraping out into nothingness.

My brother calls me on the phone and he asks me what I am studying, and I tell him it is too big to be explained, a large tenement structure of interlocking apartments, and all doors open to all other rooms, and all rooms have only one door. Sometimes there are words written on the walls, and I shape them out with my human mouth, but the syllables are strange and they are not mine. I tell him that there is Someone sitting in the courtyard, dark haired and slim bodied, but no matter what window I look out of I cannot see Their face.

V.

In a bramble patch called Carolina, a baby is born with yellow skin and a pearl in her fist— she is given iron tablets for her liver and the pearl is moved succinctly from her left hand to her right. Someday she will open her mother's pinewood chest of drawers, pawing through the collected silks and muslins without intention, and the pearl will roll from its hiding place and find her once more. It will fit flawlessly into the small red birthmark she has carried with her on her left hand, and both will weep, shoulders hunched in the wine-dark bedroom, mourning the bond that could not be.

My mother was also born left handed, well accustomed to her school pens being snatched from her devil fist and transferred to the muscle of her right. She would be stood on a high backed chair and asked to recite her multiplication tables, if she thought she was so smart. Her shoes would be confiscated, thrown into the water pails which stood outside every classroom, and she would walk home barefoot. But no wickedness can be stamped out entirely: when reaching up, up, up, to catch a stone or ball or gnawed peach pit, it is her left hand which extends into the heavens, arched delicately in a neat, blue fist.

We were never redirected as children, never picked up from our made up games and oriented towards the sun. Our palms were formed empty. Perhaps we would have grown differently, not so disparate, secretive, if our mother had taken the pens from our left hands, wrapped them in our right. My sister is in Berlin, shaking a message from its human holder. I



am underground in the Olympia public library, looking for an answer to a question I don't know how to ask. My brother... who's to say? Who's to say? Some nights my mother wakes from a solitary dream with her nose bleeding, her thoughts fevered and choking on the smoke of nightmare and centering, finally around my brother, his skin yellow and toxic and his lungs cracking open for desperate air. He also gets nosebleeds when he is scared. He is, in many ways, the most like her: they are both creatures curled in the delicate fortress of an egg shell, warm and lonesome.

Drawing the curtains closed, my mother sits in a blue darkness and listens to the night howl, wondering where her son is, which way he is facing.

*Green God*

I.

From Ebba's bedroom window we could have seen the police arrive, but I had not thought to call her, and she had not called me. The next evening, when I apologetically crawled into her apartment with my knuckles bruised, I asked her what had happened, because I knew she wanted to tell me. I have always been a good and honest listener, able to follow a story even when it is happening in a hundred different ways, and Ebba could only tell her stories like that, backwards, then forwards. "What happened?" I asked her, and she leaned away from me in the windowsill, her back arched against the frame: she needed room to move, to speak with her hands.

"They were outside for six hours, at least," she said. Her hands had folded the beer label into a shape that was at once masculine, feminine, and aural, and she tossed it gently onto the carpet. "They kept the lights on the entire time. Right under my window."

I resisted saying that she could have come to my apartment, which had no heat then, and has none still. "I thought at first it was just someone speeding," she continued. "But then they started to shout, and I looked out and the police had both of these men on the ground, with their ankles tied to their wrists—what's that called?"

"Hogtied," I said, and I began to shake, as I always do when I know something somebody does not, and when I did not expect to find answers in the pockets of thought I have left.

"Hogtied," Ebba said. "Does that happen a lot here?"

"It happens," I said, though I didn't really know.

“I guess it does, cause I saw it,” and she paused for a moment in this tautology, tracing its shape, its ribs and vellum horns, with her fingertips. “Their car--the men who got hogtied--their car was so fucked up. I can’t believe they were still driving it. I could see the blood from here.”

“They hit someone.” It was like her to have forgotten to mention, to have gotten lost in the physical realities of what she had seen. Again I was sorry she had not called me, and I had not called her, and that I had spent the evening shivering with my fingers in my mouth instead of here, in her window, watching the police arrest two men who had hit a person.

She shook her head. “That’s what I thought too, but this morning Mike told me that he’d seen the whole thing, that they’d driven out and hit the Green God who lives in the field, the one by the highway.”

*Who is Mike?* I wanted to say, but I did not. I listened to her lean back against the windowsill, a gesture so natural and glowing that it seemed like the room would begin to smoke, the curtains and pillows she had made herself filling with fire, knotting up in flame. “Did you ever see the Green God?” I asked, and I began to sweat.

“Oh, once. A few summers ago. I went up with my parents when they helped me move in.”

“What did She look like?” I was hoping she would draw it for me, and that I could take the drawing home with me in my coat pocket, tape it to my refrigerator—but instead she undid her hands in descriptive gestures, opening and closing her fingers on her bare legs, lifting them

up to her forehead. “She had almost—with these...” and her hands, in front of her face now: teeth. “She was always howling when it rained, you know, with the hump of fur on Her back. My ex-girlfriend had a tattoo of Her, on the nape of her neck.”

Two weeks ago I had arrived on Ebba’s windowsill and she had pulled a wicked looking splinter out of my thumb, perfect in concentration. She took me into her kitchen and we smoked out of a bowl she had made herself, and I wanted very badly to have something honest to tell her, but soon I was going home.

## II.

The owl-mouthed beams of my headlights choke and sputter and fall to pieces, the darkness unfolding in a portrait negative, a song unsung. The roads are cold, the way darkness is always cold, even the darkness of gasping awake, palms wet, reaching for a hand, a foot, a sign that someone else is with me in this bed, locked in a dream of their own which I cannot touch. On roads like these the Gods are kings again, and they cross the asphalt with their heads up, and they wander the forest fearless. Blood mats in their fur. Bones crunch between their teeth. They cavort and dance and scream words that are undoubtedly their own, and the dusk-lit translators crouched in the brush lick their pens and begin the work of the night.

Only The Green God does not chase, does not eat with Her canine teeth. She moves with purpose, lifting one of Her thousand spindled hooves, placing it into the earth— just piercing the soil— lifting another, repeating the process until She has found the object of Her wanting, the sweet dew of a night time thistle. No, She was not always nocturnal. There was a time, maybe a hundred years ago, maybe even longer, when She would wander the kingdom of the sun without fear. The people brought Her wild honey and burned sweet smelling brush in Her forest altars. The other Gods are repulsed by the scent of Her body, and so She has learned to live without fleeing the strong, without feasting on the weak, and so She has been the same size since the day She crawled from the center of the Earth. The Green God's legs are a delicate extension of Her slender neck, fawn ears, black tongue—Her body is hardly solid, and shatters at the touch.

“Is it dead?” Laura asks me in a devout whisper, and the darkness my headlights reveal is red tinted, legs cracked and bones showing, one desperate intestine spewed on cruel asphalt like an unwound body of thread. There is a bruise across my chest like a tortoise brand. Laura grips my fingers where she had reached out to grab them, tangled in my lap and color of engine smoke. The forest is shivering in impact, in shock, and it pulls back its shuddering form to show us what I have done, the death I have written so carelessly, three white eyes convulsing and foaming and begging...

### III.

In the valley, Summer is a chaos. It is a vision placed on the waiting tongues of revelers to dissolve with the coming sun. Look with lifted fists at the mountains, blue in the light, plum dark when evening catches its bosky paws around the sky. Look with bowed heads at the river, and tighten the ropes so they cut our palms like a relic offering-- lift the traps into our boat and count the crabs inside. The valley is an orchard in summer. The valley has been alive a thousand years, and from one knotted root it grew, before hands even reached into the dirt and half-made heads tried to pray. The sun and the earth and the birds are all revelation, mirages dragged from a dream and locked into being by the prison bowl of the valley. In desperate winters the fruit-trees will open their palms and swallow the light they have kept hidden there.

But it is summer now, and the valley is a rocking altar, borne on the shoulders of emaciated loyalties. Somewhere a plume of smoke is rising from a tender human mouth, and that mouth is mine.

It's hardly worth describing, days like these. The moss pushes back against my body and dirt hooks in my hair. What is there to say? My senses hum and vibrate so quickly they become something else altogether, and it is as if I can taste everything, as if I could unhinge my jaw and eat the whole world. If Gods are real, they start right here. If Gods are born, they grow like peaches, heavy and soft and full of water. They drop to the ground and smell of rot, and the earth eats up their rot and grows. Lying in the dirt of God-rot I remember my prayers, the ones I taught myself, and I whisper them once more, letting the light color my skin, bleach my hair.



Soon I will rise, still praying, still pretending, and collect the peaches which have fallen to the ground in a wicker basket. I will wrap the pits in a wet towel, and tomorrow morning I will travel the valley with no shoes on, dipping my fingertips into the soft earth. There are forms of worship that do not hurt, that do not demand the cruor of my limbs, the abeyance of a thousand years...

*Woman*

## I.

Passivity has found its apex in Her, Her firm white forms and beads of God flesh. No way to know if She is truly what they say: a creature which crawled heady and foaming from the place where beauty comes from; all that is known was written before there were words to write, shapes to form. If the heuristic signets of forgetting could be transcribed they would say: “She has been born forever, and She is unknown for now.” The center of Her wordless clearing is pitiless, like the seeds of water rubbed from a sweating glass, damp on the thumb; the orange tree flowers and withers, the blue lipped paradise blossoms curl over Her knotted forelimbs, gentle, fist-sized birds scaffold Her breasts with thread and paper. She has no more worshippers: She has outlived them all.

Of the thatch hovels which crouch wan and sleepy at the base of Her great mountain, there is no one who makes the journey to Her secret grove, no one who fills Her jade altar with yuzu and honey suckle, who looks up from their game of shells and croons missives to the mountain. There are no images of the great, still, figure on any temple-walls or diaries, and even the techniques known by Her fatal immortalizers, the necessities of the stylus and the jaggling wheel, have been lost to the claw of disinterest.

Her name is a word unuttered.

Her body is a lost supreme.

No matter. By spring the clearing's orchids have bloomed, throats open for six willful hours, and it is Her milky eyes that witness these fleeting seconds, and it is Her that the orchids look upon in tender awe, hardly daring to breathe, trying to pray and forgetting the words. And so they die. And so the clearing's grass grows thick and gnarled, tangling together in the relaxed intimacy that develops in all inhuman spaces. Only the fleas which leap from the fine powder dusting of Her flesh, the Omni-weighted ballast of Her torso, possess movement, and they move around Her glacial muscles in a black circus.

No bites draw blood.

No wind unwinds Her.

By autumn the silver blades of hurricane and helicopter have razed the once verdant exile into a pillar of nothing. Mottled and decayed, Her skin becomes scarred with shapes that, in a different time, would have been pondered by white cloaked philosophers, each mark's impact on the future discerned through a process that was ritual, cerebral, and incorrect. Now the future carved by Her flesh is for Her alone, and She will stand, Her ankles buried in fertile earth, until the rain stops, and until the rain returns, and until rain is gone from the world.

She has no answers.

She has no thoughts.

She does not know that Gods are dying, every day another felled with a red-black whimper. She does not know that one day She too will die, Her timbered corpse discovered and Her body uprooted—

She only is, and only does.

## II.

Now Attila stood in the river with her pants rolled up, her chin juttred in hard relief. There was something palatial in the idea of her—a Corinthian object made barbarous by its Northern executions. The joinery of her limbs, the breathless connection of shoulder and collarbone, was proof of an immense formal training and thought, the study of solitary work in an oriented workshop. And yet, there was still so much more to understand, and so many instances of failure: the awkward transition of her waist into her hips, her small, immaculate hands. A thread hung from her shirt sleeve. There was a knot in her hair. Unknowing, unaware, she shifted her weight from one foot to the other, and the surface of the water was broken, and we stood together and rediscovered ourselves in some secret culvert of the shore, not speaking or touching or putting our shoes back on.

We lay, caught in the jaws of each other, on the black sand beach, and always, no matter how far from Earth we felt our bodies rise, we knew there was another body straining to be lifted from the depths, a body more profound and unknowable than anything Attila and I had ever tried to understand. Her stomach glowed, and on her glowing stomach my fingers could feel a necklace of raised round skin, a wet pink against pale.

In devout and precious moments I feel a prayer growing in my stomach, and so it was now, hardly breathing in the shallows of the river. But that prayer is not to a God, for there are

no Gods really—there is only right now, in the swelled pink shallows, the water sounds like the echo of a church bell, reaching me in my own sea-headed heaven, and my mind, blessedly empty!

### III.

In the summer my sister and I would search the stripped sand of our grandparents' beach house for clams, prying their jaws open with our pocket knives. The only pearl we ever found was imbedded in the roof of the clam's mouth, some subtle aberration in the capture of the parasite antigen, and rather than contained, and sealed, and ejected, the foreign becomes entrenched in the hard bone of jaw, partially covered by incandescent membrane. There was no way to extract it with our small tools, and so we took the clam with us, and left it on the porch to dry.

I wondered what aberrations had occurred in Attila, to possess these soft seeds, like a line of precious Braille up her side. She smelled like the sea, like bread, like some darker combination of the two. I asked her what her scars were, and my mouth felt full with sea air.

"They're flea bites," she said, and I knew that they were. My dog would get fleas every year, during that last week of fall when all the shade has fallen but it is not yet cold. We would hear him moaning at night, outside, while my sister and I slept in clean beds and pitied him.

"You don't have a dog," I said. My hand was limp on her hip bone. I could still smell the sea, and I could feel the stones beneath us shaking as the clouds began to crack open, the quivered moment like the spasm of a weakened muscle. We had known the storm was coming, but still we carried ourselves to the lightness of the river and lay with each other among the shallows, the little sea.



The storm had first arrived almost a year ago, the night I had awoken from pre-dawn dreams with a bug crawling inside my mouth. I had cried out, or I had not, and my sister had not heard me, had not awoken from her animal sleep and answered.

“Do you have a dog?” I asked, and her mouth shaped an answer that I could not hear over the white thunder, and the men on the boats cried out, and the river roared as its marvelous weight returned, a noise like a jaw snapping open on wet sand, like a coin dropping in an empty urn.

#### IV.

Tangled in the nets glistened the first day's catch: the holy prey. Her father pulled his lips back into a smile, the way a tarp is pulled from the forgotten machines of an airplane hangar. To the others of the island her father is a thief, a scavenger and a hedonist, reaching into the secret grottos and sinking his teeth. In the halls of warriors, her father likes to say, he would be a hero, and aboard their gifted, stolen boat, she can only agree.

In the morning she is tangled in the nets of the bedroom she shares with her cousin, their beds so close that, if she wanted, Laura could nod awake and press her forehead to Maya's. Maybe when they were children they had woken up this way, laughing to one another in the sleepy ease of a shared dream, but Laura was never a child. She was born twenty-two, and she is twenty-two now, pulling her wool sweater over her dark head like the cowl of a poisoner. Her father, the Zatheeri, is in the kitchen, frying white fish in an iron pan. She can hear it through the walls, the hiss and sizzle of morning, and for a moment Laura remembers a dream she had in some window of the night, a phrase rising through the tide, the stumble, of awareness. Laura, beautiful and lunar, rests her head on the plastic grain of the kitchen table, and she thinks about time, and she thinks about me.

"I need you on the boat today," God-Killer says gruffly, rubbing crumbs out of his moustache. "Maya too. Make sure she gets up before noon."

“Okay,” Laura says, running her fingers along the spine skin of the aloe her father has growing in the window box. “Do you want me to make dinner?”

“What do you think?”

The last time I thought of God was at her kitchen table, and she boiled Him in vodka while I buttoned up my shirt and continued to cry. Her hair was tied back in the tangle which I had always envied: when she arrived at the shore, waiting for my boat to dock, all the men and all the seals had raised their heads and followed her with impugned eyes. I was standing at the helm and I raised my hand as high as I could, opening and closing my fist against the sky. The ferry rocked back and forth against the dock and for one shivering moment I imagined leaping into the ocean and swimming to shore, the summer ice breaking beneath my white shoes.

This is all I can say about Laura: She was beautiful and lunar and ate Gods. She woke up each morning and prayed to no one. She handed me the flesh of joy, and I ate it, without guilt, without thinking to be afraid.

V.

I don't know. One night I woke up with the pain in my stomach, the sweating consumption, the wet pain. I wanted to call out to my father, wanted him to find me and lift me from my winter sheets and carry me to the hospital, but my teeth were clenched together and spit was pooling into the lines of my face. My sister did not kick her feet fitfully against the covers, did not hear me whimpering, and maybe this began our descent from each other, the cessation of our shared dreams. Maybe if she had heard, had crossed the boundary of our bedroom and held my collapsed head in her lap—who knows. One night I woke shaking and writhing beneath the moon. At a certain point I stopped looking to Gods and began praying to women.

There are never less than a thousand women in my head at all times, brushing against me in elevators and reaching out over the interstate to offer me a ride, a cigarette, the time of day. The quaking weight of them all. But it is still a shock to see a girl in conversation with herself, wholly narrative, wholly monologic. A body like a basilica—the kind of thing you look at and think: how did they do that? Every part symmetrical and pedagogical and unknowable. Somebody lay these bricks, erected and condemned the scaffolding, breathed in dust. Somebody mined these stones.

Never again have I hurt so completely that I could not cry out for help, save for that solitary moment of realization, of body epiphany, when I shook with the desire to fall to my

knees and weep, to crack open my jaw and beg, and could not. At last, here, in the snow caverns of nowhere, I had found the sublime answer, the God I prayed for, and she would never be mine.

“You’re very sweet,” she said, unbinding her golden body to turn off the lights, turn down the bed, so perfectly unutterable that I began to shake, reaching into the dark, taking her into my arms...

*Last God*

I.

Pray, if you can, to the Last God: offer gold thread or black cloth to the winter dusk, and She will take it from your back porch with no marks upon the snow. I will call to remind you, because this is the kind of thing you would forget to do, and regret not doing; I will call you and not say anything, and you will know it is me because it is winter, and has been for weeks. You will find the thread you bought last spring, and you will hang up the phone.

Pray to The Last God: tie on your boots and spit into the snow. The ice you've made will feed Her and in return She will keep the frost from your spider plants, the chill from your fingers. The snow is beginning to fall and I want to remind you to write down what you are thinking, but you are explaining the difference between thinking and enjoying, though I have always known. I want to remind you I have lived here my whole life, that I know every coursing vein of the highway and the caverns where animals hide, while you have drifted to every nowhere that exists, and you have taken your journals with you. You have read my whole book, and left notes in the margins. You are lighting a fire in my living room, and burning the wallpaper.

Pray to The Last God: the ink in my pen has run out, so I cannot write to remind you to leave honey in a glass bowl on your window sill, so She will smell it in the stillness of morning and you will never die. I cannot tell you that my heat has been turned off, and the only blankets I own were once my mother's. I cannot tell you that I am sure of something now, sure that there is something to pray for, just as you have always told me there was. My God is running Her

claws through the walls, shivering with me, and I have forgotten Her name, and I have forgotten the name you gave Her.

Pray to the only God left, the one I saved for you. I am standing on the corner of the intersection and yours is the only window open.





## *Afterword*

In C.S. Lewis's autobiography, Surprised by Joy, he states "Everything that was going on [before we began our act of introspection] is stopped by the very act of our turning to look at it." So too, in the conception of this project, I was stopped by the recognition that each disparate thread and each numbered section, which I had been carefully arranging parallel to one another, would one day have to intersect, and that very intersection, by nature, would answer a great question I had been forming without even meaning to.

But what was that question? And what, for that matter, was this project? Upon realizing that I did not know the answer I immediately turned my attentions inwards, and all thought seemed to vitiate itself, and I was left with only a loose sheaf of paper and question I didn't know how to ask.

Much of Lewis's autobiography is devoted to the discovery of his faith in God. Perhaps discovery is the wrong word, for Lewis's journey is more of a return, or a defining of a certain spiritual presence which has always existed and he did not know how to discern. This presence is characterized by a powerful and physical joy, a lightheadedness, a previously unknown excitement. Like most of us, these moments of joy struck Lewis frequently in childhood, less often in adolescence, and rarely in adulthood. He blames the increased brevity of these moments on the above stated problem of introspection: once one notices this profound feeling and, in that

adult desperation to define all unknown forces, attempts to understand what joy is and from where it originated, the feeling will, without fail, disappear. One cannot enjoy an external phenomenon while one is contemplating its effect on one's internal make up, and so, as quickly as it came, the presence of God and divine good is lost, swatted away by the so-human need to reason and describe.

When reading this project I can only ask that the reader remember Lewis's explanation of faith, for it is the one I had adhered to for much of my life. Until, perhaps, months ago, I could enjoy what I was if I did not question anything deeply. But, by nature, the Senior Project resists this way of thinking. One must question the self in order to complete a body of work such as the one I have set out to complete, even if, to my knowledge, I have never allowed myself to agonize in this human way, for fear that I would lose the pockets of joy I had, by some miracle, carved out for myself.

But joy is fleeting. It is surprising. It cannot be forced, nor caught, nor questioned until its intentions are made clear. And without joy, without the sureness which permeates from those small seconds of being, all that is left is the human. And this project is human. It is wanting. It is holding its breath between one moment of joy and another, and it is beginning to run out of air.

The Gods in these stories are not how Lewis, nor Luther, nor anybody but me could imagine Them. But the feeling They demand upon witness, and the questions They pose and do not answer, and the forms They take and take and disregard, are as divine and complex as any

other body of theology. For They are my theology. The people in these stories are not my family, as they exist in the waking world, but the figures which, in dreams, are the exact replications of the dreamer, rendered in tender ego. All are part of myself, and the house I have built, whose shape is always changing, and whose windows look out to the river.

I do not believe, any longer, that joy comes from the refusal to question, from letting things be. Instead, for my faith, for the pantheon I am carrying with me, I have chosen another maxim of Lewis's: "To cease thinking about or attending to the woman is, so far, to cease loving." I do not believe that thought and joy cannot exist together, that the empty headed moments of elation are the only instances of faith: they exist together here, voices light with human music, hands pressed to their collarbones, soft in a worship that does not hurt.



